DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 107 CG 025 968

AUTHOR	Hartung, Paul J.
TITLE	Assessing Career Certainty and Choice Status. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CG-95-19
PUB DATE	30 Jan 95
CONTRACT	RR93002004
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Career Choice; *Career Counseling; Career Exploration; Career Guidance; Career Planning; Careers; Decision Making; *Evaluation Methods; Self Evaluation (Individuals); Test Interpretation
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Career certainty refers to the degree to which individuals feel confident, or decided, about their occupational plans. Since Parsons first classified people into career-decided and career-undecided groups, counseling researchers and practitioners have worked to formally assess career choice status. These efforts have yielded two generations of instruments useful for gauging clients' levels of and reasons for indecision as well as degrees of certainty about their career choices. First generation measures of career choice status yield total indecision scores. They have generated research on identifying multiple subtypes of undecided people and on developing differential interventions for each type. Second generation measures differ significantly from earlier instruments in that they were developed explicitly to assess multiple dimensions of career indecision. Counselors can use these scales to identify specific barriers that prevent a client from reaching a career-decided state. Surveying clients in terms of their choice status continues to help researchers understand the complexity of career indecision and choice status. It also aids practitioners in planning appropriate career counseling interventions. (JBJ)

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by Paul J. Hartung

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ERIC DIGEST

1995 EDO-CG-95-19

Assessing Career Certainty and Choice Status

Paul J. Hartung, Ph.D.

Overview

Career certainty refers to the degree to which individuals feel confident, or decided, about their occupational plans. The construct proves elusive to explain clearly unless considered in terms of the larger domain of career decision making and, specifically, career indecision. Research has yielded a variety of instruments useful for assessing career indecision. These instruments typically include a measure of career certainty by using one or two items that in part comprise a larger inventory that surveys career choice status. These measures give counselors important practical tools for appraising clients' career choice status as a step in assisting clients to alleviate their career indecision. Measures of career certainty and indecision also provide researchers with a means of determining the efficacy of career counseling interventions.

Parsons (1909) pioneered the study and assessment of career certainty and career indecision. In his work, he classified people into career-decided (i.e., certain) and career-undecided (i.e., uncertain) groups. Some years later, Williamson (1937) discounted empirically the then widely-held belief that certainty of vocational choice predicts scholastic achievement. As part of his research, Williamson asked students reporting definite vocational choices to rate themselves as very certain, certain, or uncertain about their choices. Research such as Williamson's that used Parsons' dichotomous model to study career-decided and career-undecided groups produced mixed and inconsistent results. Some studies found that decided and undecided people showed significant personality or performance differences, whereas other studies found no differences between these two groups (see Slaney, 1988a for a review). As one way of resolving these inconsistent findings, researchers reconceptualized undecided people as comprising different sub-types and turned to developing psychometric instruments that would assess degree of and reasons for career uncertainty. Work by Savickas (1992) suggests that these measures now constitute two generations of instrument development.

First-Generation Measures

First-generation measures of career choice status yield total indecision scores. Such instruments, although not multidimensional by design, have generated considerable research on identifying multiple subtypes of undecided people and developing differential interventions for each type.

Initially called the Types Questionnaire, the *Career Decision Scale* (CDS; Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico, & Koschier, 1976) ranks as the prototypical first-generation measure. The original title of the CDS reflected the purpose of the instrument to scale various decisional problem types and to measure antecedents of career indecision. Although predated by other measures, such as the *Vocational Decision Making Difficulty* scale (VDMD; Holland, Gottfredson, & Nafziger, 1973), the CDS represents the earliest published attempt to assess level of and reasons for career indecision.

The CDS emerged from work beginning in a graduate seminar and evolved from an initial 14 items to its current 19-item format. Items one and two comprise the Certainty Scale and assess respondents' decidedness about, respectively, their career and academic major choices. Respondents rate themselves on these two items according to their levels of certainty and perceived comfort with and ability to implement their choices. Items 3-18 make up the Indecision Scale which assesses reasons for career indecision and correlates negatively with the Certainty Scale. Item 19 offers an open-ended response opportunity to clarify or elaborate on responses to the 18 preceding items. Osipow et al. (1976) designed the CDS primarily for high school and college students although, as Slaney (1988a) notes, it has been adapted successfully for use with graduate students, medical students, and non-traditional female college students. Extensive evidence exists for the reliability as well as the construct and concurrent validity of the measure (Slaney, 1988b). Counselors use the CDS to efficiently gauge clients' levels of decidedness, reasons for indecision, and to plan specific interventions based on item responses.

Many researchers have conducted factor-analytic studies of the CDS to determine whether its items scale different dimensions of indecision. If the CDS proved to measure different dimensions of indecision then counselors could use it to identify not only general indecision levels but also specific barriers to making career decisions. These factor analytic studies have fueled much debate about the utility of the CDS for this purpose. The dispute

over the validity of the CDS as a multidimensional measure has produced a second generation of career certainty and career indecision measures.

Second-Generation Measures

Recent years have witnessed the emergence of a new age of career choice status measures. These measures differ significantly from earlier instruments in that researchers developed these later measures explicitly to assess multiple dimensions of career indecision. In so doing, these measures expanded Parsons' original model by operationally defining indecision as a multidimensional construct.

A revision of the *Vocational Decision Scale, the Career Decision Profile* (CDP; Jones, 1989) typifies measures designed specifically to scale different dimensions of career indecision and career choice status. Jones (1989) based the CDP on his and a colleague's earlier vocational decision status model. He showed in his initial validity study of the CDP that the vocational decision status model, consisting of three dimensions, "provides a clearer picture of career indecision than current unitary approaches" (p. 477). The CDP assesses respondents along the dimensions of (a) decidedness, or degree of certainty about choice, (b) comfort, or degree of contentment with decisional status, and (c) reasons, or basis for being decided or undecided.

The CDP Decidedness Scale contains two items on which respondents rate themselves using an 8-point scale. The first item contains content about having an occupational field in mind. The second item concerns having decided on an occupation to enter. Two additional items comprise the CDP Comfort Scale and contain content related to feeling at ease with or worried about career choice. Counselors can pair a client's scores on the scales of Decidedness and Comfort to profile a client' s choice status as decided/comfortable, decided/uncomfortable, undecided/comfortable, undecided/uncomfortable. Four additional scales, each containing three items, assess respondents' reasons for their career uncertainty. These scales include (a) Self-Clarity, which concerns having knowledge about one's own interests, abilities, and so on, (b) Knowledge About Occupations and Training, which taps world-of-work knowledge, (c) Decisiveness, which measures ability to decide independently and resolutely, and (d) Career Choice Importance, which gauges feelings about the significance of work and making a career choice. Counselors can use these scales to identify specific barriers that prevent a client from reaching a career-decided state.

Summary and Conclusion

Since Parsons (1909) first classified people into career-decided and career-undecided groups, counseling researchers and practitioners have worked to formally assess career choice status. These efforts have yielded two generations of instruments useful for gauging clients' levels of and reasons for indecision as well as degrees of certainty about their career choices. Surveying clients in terms of their choice status continues to help researchers understand the complexity of career indecision and choice status. It also aids practitioners in planning appropriate career counseling interventions.

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